

THE INITIATIONS OF A PROGRAM FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AMONG RURAL LABORERS OF THE SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY

by

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Location and Description of the Community.

Tracy is situated in the San Joaquin Valley, where commercial agricultural enterprise grows fruits, nuts and vegetables for the world market. The scale of production is indicated by the fact that many of the farmers have such "hired hands" as public relations men!

The community with which we are concerned includes Larch and Clover roads and the connecting roads of Tracy and Corral Hollow, north and west of Tracy, California. Comprehensive knowledge of the area is not available. However, a general surface description is possible. There are several bracero camps. Most of the people are not migrant at this time. It would be interesting to know more of their backgrounds. It appears that some come from migrants of the 1930s and '40s; Mexican rural laborers, southern share-croppers and small middle-western farmers. Ethnic origins are Mexican, Southern Negro and Middle Western Anglos.

Housing has developed in a chaotic manner. There are a few individually owned houses which are nicely kept up and have gardens and lawns. But most of the people live in the little scrap lumber shacks which crowd the land on either side of the roads. Sanitation is hazardous. Many of the shacks have outdoor toilets. Indoor toilets are connected to septic tanks. The land consists of heavy clay, which means drainage is very poor. The health department authorizes only one house per acre here, but there are often up to ten houses per acre. Pollution is evident by the sight of pools of sewage even during the dry season. Drinking water is obtained from nearby wells. Diarrheal diseases are common.

There is no organized system for garbage disposal. Incinerators are used, but large areas around the dwellings are strewn with paper, tin cans, and broken glass. The air is polluted with the smells from the nearby sugar refinery coupled with the odors of garbage and sewage. In short, this is one of America's rural slums.

Living Conditions of the People.

Work is seasonal and job placement disorganized. Some agricultural workers and their families follow the crops during the harvest season and return to Tracy after school starts in the fall. Others work in the area, often traveling 20 to 30 miles each morning. A job may last a day or two weeks. The worker must then go to the labor office, contractor or farmer in search of new employment. At the sugar mill, hundreds stand in line at the opening of the season for a handful of jobs in a highly automated plant. Many women work in the canneries during the season. Here shifts are constantly being changed, and a mother is hard pressed arranging for child care under these circumstances. Some laborers commute long distances to the Bay area and other places.

Families are large, many with eight to ten children. There is inadequate space for play, study, hobbies or privacy. School buses take the children to the Tracy public schools where they must find their way among the children from families of a higher economic level. School drop-outs are frequent. Teenagers are left adrift to find their own way with little interest or understanding from the adult community.

There are no facilities for recreation. The town offers expensive bowling, dances, drinking, movies for young adults. For children, Tracy has a recreation department with a low-organization program virtually unavailable to the children of Larch and Clover roads.

The people of North Tracy live side by side and share some problems, but there is little or no community life in the organic sense.

Origins of the Clover Community Program.

It is difficult to specify the origin of this program. As with all things it developed from the convergence of many factors, from a variety of sources. Several people have had an interest in the Larch and Clover community for a number of years. Centered around the activities of the Catholic Church, a credit union had been organized as well as the beginnings of a cooperative housing project. Coupled with this has been a general awakening outside of the community, to the problems of agricultural laborers.

Rudimentary plans for a day-care center were made by a few individuals in July. AWOC agreed to pay \$50.00 per week for a director's salary, on a temporary basis.

Several meetings of interested persons from Tracy and the community were held. Out of these meetings emerged a broader perspective. The name Clover Community Program was decided upon and a board of directors appointed. This board is made up of local people, representatives of various unions and professional people from Tracy. Many of these people have remained interested and meetings have been held twice a month.

Development of the Day Care Center.

This was to be the first of the projects on the program. It was organized specifically, but not exclusively, for the children of agricultural workers during the harvest season. It was hoped that a program of education could be begun which would help the youngsters to better understand the community and their place in it.

We were able to obtain the use of the Cristo Rey Center on Clover Road. This is a building constructed by the Guadalupe Society for use as a Catholic Church and community center. Folding doors separate the altar from the large hall. There is a kitchen, two sinks in a separate area, two bathrooms, each with one toilet, and two storage rooms. Outside there is a lawn, some sidewalk, a large parking lot and driveway. In back is a game area with a back stop. There are two basket ball rings and a pair of swings.

The building had no screens, several broken windows and no steps leading to the kitchen door. The grounds were littered with glass, which was constantly being added to by the neighboring children. An area near the side of the building had been flooded and dried into ridges and gulleys of caked clay. The two kitchen stoves had no vents. The plumbing arrangements are very poor and were constantly causing trouble for the first month.

Volunteer Work Projects.

During the first week of August, five or six students from the University of California, San Francisco State College and Oakland City College came to Tracy to work on the project. These students belong to an organization called SCAL (Students Committee for Agricultural Labor). They began to clean the grounds, clear a playground area with pick and shovel and finish a nearby small building. The following week thirty young people arrived. We agreed to provide food; they slept outside in sleeping bags. Some of them worked in the fields and others remained at the center. One of the girls had contacted book stores in Berkeley and had collected about \$100.00 worth of books. Every person brought donations of clothes, toys, books or food. Much further work was done on the center and surrounding grounds. Areas were cleared of weeds, lumber poles cleared, glass and rubbish picked up. Kitchen cupboards were built. The donations were sorted, a sand box constructed, swings repaired and put up. Some of the students remained in Tracy and spent many hours replacing windows, making screens and repairing the constantly breaking down plumbing system. Various people in the community loaned us tools and contributed work. A man from the carpenters' union put vents on the stove. The Young Christian Workers painted the floor and worked generally. These work encampments continued for several weeks.

Help from Tracy came from a number of people and organizations. Nursery school furniture was loaned to us from Wainwright Village housing project. The Tracy Recreation Department gave us swimming passes. We had hoped to have a program of immunizations, T.B. testing and visits to the well-baby clinic. The Public Health Department of San Joaquin County were very helpful in giving us educational material and in discussing a possible health program. The people from the State Department of Welfare were very sympathetic and provided us with information needed to obtain a license. Contributions of food and work came from many individuals living on Larch and Clover roads. Various merchants helped by giving us items such as cement and baby ointment either free or at cost. One of the local doctors contributed a good supply of vitamins.

The Tracy Guide and the Valley Union newspapers wrote favorable stories and station KPFA in Berkeley made some announcements regarding the week-end encampments. Door-to-door visits were made in the community at which time a flyer was distributed and people were told about the day-care center.

Functioning of the Day-Care Center.

We were prepared to open on August 15th but there were no registrations. For two weeks we had a recreation program for children from 5 to 12 years of age. Volunteer workers helped them with games, stories, sports and free play. An average of 20 children attended daily. School was starting the first week of September so we stopped the recreation program to concentrate on getting the day care started.

The first two weeks of September were discouraging. The center was opened daily for registration, but there was no response from the community. Investigation showed several reasons for this. One of course, was total lack of experience with this kind of service. Another was that the tomato harvest was late. The primary trouble, however, was the age limit we had put on registration. Licensing requires that no children under two years be admitted. We agreed to take a few babies and registrations came in immediately.

From September 9th to October 1st, we cared for from 10 to 17 children daily. The youngest infant was three weeks old, several were under one year. Ages ranged from three weeks to 12 years. Most of the children arrived at 5:00 a.m. It was 6:00 p.m. before all of them were picked up.

Two young mothers from Berkeley came to Tracy on a volunteer basis to help. One spent two weeks, the other one week. Other volunteers helped for a day or so at a time. One woman took the tiny baby into her home several afternoons. Occasionally lunches for the children were brought in. A woman from Larch Road was hired for three days a week.

Besides breakfast and lunch, the children were given snacks and vitamins daily. The Migrant Ministry gave us materials for hygiene kits which were very popular. The children who were not in school had naps on the church pews.

We were overwhelmed with chores, infant care, cooking, dishes and general supervision. There was no time for the education and health programs that were planned, no time to do the organizational and administrative work required.

Operations were closed on October 1st as it was necessary to get better organized and to have further financial assistance.

Evaluation

Many people have been active on this project. Their personal satisfactions have been at least as great as their contributions in material and labor.

Material support was given to a number of families. Allowing the mother to work for a short time meant added income with which to face the long winter of unemployment. Women who have spent many years confined to dilapidated shacks with large numbers of children were relieved for a short time and able to have a change of activity.

Regular food, rest and play improved the health of the small children within a week. This, of course, isn't lasting but indicates how easily health standards could be raised.

Students who participated in the project gained valuable knowledge of the life of the rural workers. Their satisfactions were expressed when one of them thanked us for letting them be useful.

Circumstances are good at this time for further development of community life here. Negro, Anglo and Mexican people have had some experiences together which will make it possible for them to work more cooperatively on future projects. A feeling of trust has been established between the people with the community and people from outside who have participated in the program so far. There exists a board of directors and an advisory board which can be strengthened to form the basis of future work.

Perspectives.

Potentialities for further work are extensive. However, it would be a mistake to work in a haphazard manner. If a comprehensive study of the neighborhood could be done within the next few months, a more lasting and meaningful program could be planned. The number and size of families, ethnic origins, source and size of income, health and educational problems should be known. In order to plan projects which will release the initiative of the people, we must know what they feel is most lacking in their lives and just what activities they are prepared to participate in.

The proper first steps will emerge as we know the situation better and continue community work. Such activities as the following might be introduced:

Well-organized day care for small children during the harvest season could be accompanied by a day camp for the older ones. During the school year, sports and recreation clubs for the children might originate from a community center. There could be a job up-grading program for teenagers with supervised work and recreation. A study hall with tutors available would be of extreme value to the school children.

Adults could be organized into mutual help teams to assist each other with the sick, aged and destitute, or to gather and can food when it is plentiful. Classes in Spanish and English are badly needed as well as instruction in citizenship requirements. A wide variety of adult education classes could be introduced. Health education and cooperative transportation to the clinics of Stockton and Tracy would be most useful. A community-wide credit union would encourage savings and better control over the financial problems which most of these people face.

The Cristo Rey Center is not adequate for a long term development of this kind. The State Fire Marshal has found it hazardous for this purpose. If a place is to be improved and maintained by the people of the community it should belong to all of them and not to any one particular ethnic or religious group. A small bracero camp on Larch Road is for sale and would be ideal as a community center and location for student encampments.

In short, an almost infinite number of things could be done to make life more meaningful again for these alienated and forgotten people. Seeds of growth have been planted and failure to proceed at this time would make future programs much more difficult.